

Bracing for worst-case scenarios this winter

Meteorologists say weather forecast remains unclear

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Steve Browns carefully inspects one of the six-wheeled snowplows that the Delaware Department of Transportation uses for snow removal. DelDOT personnel are checking every aspect of the vehicles to ensure they are ready for winter weather. / THE NEWS JOURNAL/ROBERT CRAIG

Written by **SEAN O'SULLIVAN, The News Journal**

WILMINGTON -- While a few parts of Delaware got a fleeting taste of winter this past weekend, the state is preparing for the arrival of the full meal in the coming weeks.

Exactly how much snow is headed to Delaware this winter remains an open question.

The National Weather Service in Mt. Holly, N.J., said there is no clear model.

"It could be above, below or near normal," said meteorologist Valerie Meola.

Arguing in favor of below-average snowfall is that this is a "La Niña" year with cool water in the central Pacific, which usually brings a mild winter, Meola said.

But, she added, La Niña has far less effect on the Northeast than other areas of the country. Other conditions that drive winter weather in the Northeast are not showing a clear pattern.

Last year was a La Niña year, said New Jersey State Climatologist Dave Robinson, yet Delaware and other areas got above-average snow. Something meteorologists

call the Northeast oscillation overrode the effects of La Niña, he said, and drove coastal storms up the East Coast, bringing heavy accumulations of snow.

And while some might expect a harsh and sustained winter given the October snow, Meola said history argues against it. Wilmington has seen snow in October only four times before -- in 1925, 1940, 1962 and 1979 -- and in every one of the winters that followed the snowfall was light to average.

"None of them were considered to be extreme winters," she said.

"The odds favor tranquility," Robinson said, "but that doesn't mean it is not going to snow or there is not going to be a nor'easter or we are not going to get a cold wave."

Joe Wright, the director of maintenance and operations for the Delaware Department of Transportation, said DelDOT hopes for the best but prepares for the worst.

And given recent history and the October surprise snowstorm that buried other areas of the Northeast, DelDOT is more inclined to expect the worst.

At DelDOT's Cheswold yard on Wednesday, mechanics looked at 24 gleaming snowplow/salt-spreader trucks to make sure they are ready for snow when it arrives in bulk.

"In my four months on the job, we have had an earthquake, hurricane and a snowstorm in October," Transportation Secretary Shailen P. Bhatt said as he toured the site.

Wilmington is budgeting more for snow removal this year.

"We do not know what the winter will bring, of course, and we are following weather projections closely," said John Rago, director of communications for Mayor James M. Baker. "The weather, regardless of season, has been unpredictable and surprising in the last few years, so we simply have to be prepared to deal with it all."

Last year, Wilmington budgeted \$460,000 for snow removal but ended up spending \$566,000, tapping an emergency fund to balance its books.

This year, Rago said, the city has budgeted \$525,000 and has an additional \$125,000 available in a contingency fund.

Wright said the cost of snow removal for DelDOT can be at little as \$1 million for a mild winter. More recently, though, the costs have been closer to the nearly \$18 million peak set in 2009-2010, when a record 72 inches fell.

The average snowfall for Delaware is about 20 inches, according to the National Weather Service, and last year about 27 inches fell.

Generally, DelDOT budgets about \$3 million for snow removal and turns to its general operating fund to cover overruns. Bhatt said DelDOT is looking to increase that amount given the recent snow trends.

Wright said that as he understands it, temperatures are expected to be higher between snow events this year, which means the sun might clean up more of the snow and ice. During the past couple winters, with prolonged

subfreezing temperatures, ice and snow have stuck around longer, requiring more removal work.

If the worst comes to pass, Bhatt and others said, DelDOT is better prepared than most to deal with the snow. Because DelDOT is a statewide agency -- unlike most other states, where snow removal is handled by county agencies -- it can quickly move equipment and supplies to where they are needed. If, for example, Sussex County gets slammed but New Castle County escapes a snowstorm, then plows, crews and salt can be shifted to the south.

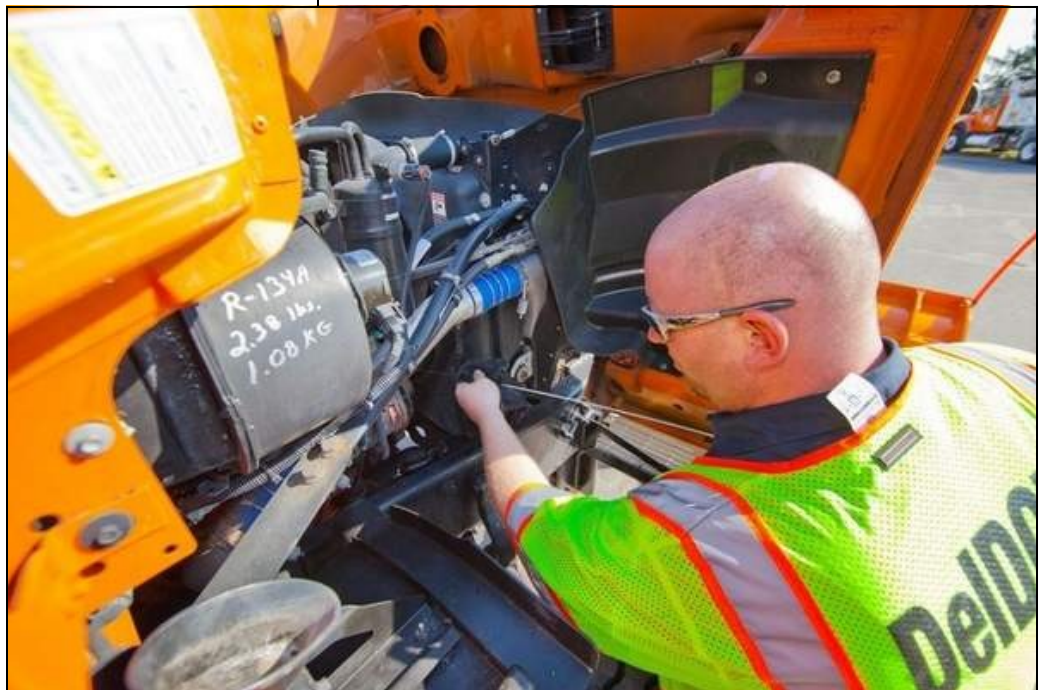
The strain comes when the entire state is hit at the same time, DelDOT said.

State Sen. Robert Venables, D-Laurel, who gives DelDOT high marks for its snow-removal work, said he believes the state should err on the side of caution because he expects a harsh winter this time around, given country wisdom.

He said local tradition holds that when holly trees are loaded with berries and persimmon trees turn a certain color and drop their fruit in the fall, as they have this year, it will be a harsh winter.

"My brother, who is 80, said I better get a second cord of wood," Venables said. "I think they would be wise to set some extra money aside."

He conceded that looking to the trees is just "an old folks thing," but he said that, in his experience, "it is almost as accurate as the weather forecast."



Daniel Timmons checks the engine oil during the inspection process of DelDOT's snowplows. DelDOT inspected 24 snowplow/salt-spreader trucks at the Cheswold location Wednesday. / THE NEWS JOURNAL/ROBERT CRAIG